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A Never-Impolite Land Where One Never Grows Up

By MANOHLA DARGIS NOV. 12, 2004

STEEPED in melancholy, the strange story of J.M. Barrie, the Victorian who wrote "Peter Pan," has the makings of a marvelous tale and one doozy of a case history. Born in Scotland in 1860, Barrie was a playwright and novelist who, after meeting a family stuffed with young boys, created in 1904 a classic of children's literature. In the years since, "Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up" has been revisited numerous times, as in the splendid 1952 Disney animation, and has become an emblem for everlasting youth, both healthy and less so.

Mary Martin soared as Peter Pan; Michael Jackson crashed. As Barrie in "Finding Neverland," a handsome-looking film about the writer and his unripe inspirations, the actor Johnny Depp neither soars nor crashes, but moseys forward with vague purpose and actorly restraint. Based on the play by Allan Knee, "The Man Who Was Peter Pan," and directed by Marc Forster, the film mainly concerns the period during which Barrie met and befriended Sylvia Llewelyn Davies (Kate Winslet) and her brood of boys. Adrift in a marriage with a former actress (Radha Mitchell) with whom he enjoyed neither

friendship nor bedroom intimacy, Barrie took to the Davies family like a famished man. What began as play-dates in the park soon evolved into a grand passion.

The geography of that passion remains inexact. Barrie loved the boys and some of the boys loved him, and it was a relationship that provided giggles and gossip. The idea that a grown man would be smitten by children sounds alarming to contemporary ears. But well-to-do Victorians shrouded their progeny in sentimentality (the poor dispatched theirs to factories and fields) and there exists no evidence that Barrie's interest in the boys was anything other than chastely romantic. At the same time, his attentions were undeniably instrumental. The boys inspired Barrie to create his greatest, most lasting work and he stayed closely involved in their lives until death. He lavished them with costly gifts and smothered them with affection, notice that occasionally provoked the irritation of the Davies paterfamilias, Arthur.

Arthur doesn't put in an appearance in "Finding Neverland," probably because having a grumbling father and husband on the scene would draw uncomfortable attention to Barrie's fixation. Sylvia is already widowed in David Magee's screenplay and more the obvious focus of the writer's attention than her children. The beautiful, bountiful widow, with her tousled hair and impeccable manners, quickly becomes an ideal substitute wife for Barrie. She raises kids he loves but doesn't have to live with, and never insists he perform any of the usual husbandly duties. The filmmakers work hard to idealize the relationship and the two actors exchange suitably noble looks even when Ms. Winslet's décolletage threatens to play peek-a-boo. It's all terribly polite, not a little dull and remote.

The problem isn't the liberties the filmmakers take with reality, but that this isn't an engaging bowdlerization. Barrie and Sylvia don't have to tussle like Halle Berry and Billy Bob Thornton in "Monster's Ball," Mr. Forster's last feature, but it would have been nice if they trembled once or twice. Mr. Depp and Ms. Winslet are pleasant to watch, as are the actors who play the Davies

boys, but they haven't been pushed to their limits. Although these two adults are surely up to pantomiming repression, Mr. Forster doesn't direct them to show what their characters cannot say. Unlike Daniel Day-Lewis's frustrated lover in Martin Scorsese's "Age of Innocence," similarly a prisoner of his time, Barrie doesn't nuzzle Sylvia's wrist or breathe in her perfume. The glaze on his face never cracks.

Like so many holiday movies with Academy Award aspirations, "Finding Neverland" is the kind of film where even the smallest crack has been sealed. Instead of real quirks, strange habits, moments of everyday gas, gurgle and grunting, movies like this give us sumptuous production design, meticulous costumes and stories meant to leave us dewy-eyed and thoughtful, if never actually disturbed. J.M. Barrie was a genius of sorts, a richly complex man who carved out a separate realm with the Davieses that helped shelter him from the storms inside and out. But "Peter Pan" wasn't just a fanciful story about charming children; it was also about Barrie's own desire to never grow up, a yearning that the filmmakers chalk up to the banal desire of an adult trying to hold onto his imagination.

In reality, Barrie was homely, barely cleared 5 feet and might have been impotent or just uninterested in sex. He met the five (not four, as in the film) Davies boys long before their father's death. Arthur died in 1907, after "Peter Pan" was mounted on the London stage, and Sylvia followed him to the grave three years later. Barrie's devotion to the children was such that he might have altered Sylvia's will so that he could take stewardship of the boys. He did, and the tragedies continued: one son was killed during World War I, another was an apparent suicide. Years after Barrie died, the 63-year-old Peter, yet another son and another suicide, threw himself under a train, having long hated his connection with his namesake. For this man who did grow up, "Peter Pan" was, as he called it, a "terrible masterpiece."

These biographical details don't fit comfortably with the popular vision of "Peter Pan," which hews closer to Disney than Barrie and, for that matter,

1950's Hollywood than fin de siècle Britain. In the play, after all, when Peter and Wendy are in danger of drowning, the boy exclaims that "to die will be an awfully big adventure." Like Barrie, whose teenage brother died when the writer was 6, the play's original audience would have been sorrowfully intimate with child mortality. Only once does "Finding Neverland" grasp both the writer and his play's dark undertow, when the wonderful Scottish actress Kelly MacDonald, in the role of Peter, realizes that Tinker Bell may die. Rousing all the heartbreak and deep feeling in Barrie's world, she entreats us to believe and, for one glorious moment, you do.

"Finding Neverland" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). The film contains a genteel death scene, demure suggestions of adult intimacy and some mild pirate action.

'Finding Neverland' Opens today nationwide.

Directed by Marc Forster; written by David Magee, based on the play "The Man Who Was Peter Pan" by Allan Knee; director of photography, Roberto Schaefer; edited by Matt Chesse; music by Jan A.P. Kaczmarek; production designer, Gemma Jackson; produced by Richard N. Gladstein and Nellie Bellflower; released by Miramax Films. Running time: 108 minutes. This film is rated PG.

WITH: Johnny Depp (Sir James Matthew Barrie), Kate Winslet (Sylvia Llewelyn Davies), Julie Christie (Mrs. Emma du Maurier), Radha Mitchell (Mary Ansell Barrie), Dustin Hoffman (Charles Frohman), Kelly MacDonald ("Peter Pan") and Ian Hart (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle).

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